

# A LETTER from a MINISTER to a Person of Quality, shewing some Reasons for his Non-conformity.

MADAM,

**Y**OU were pleased to require of me the reason of my Non-conformity; in compliance with your command, I promised to give you some account of it, but not the rtye which might be said in the cause; and therefore shall not put the whole matter and issue, upon what I have here suddenly committed to Paper, but only to satisfie you; that I have somewhat of apology for my not conforming, and that I seem (at least to my self) not wilful and fanatical, but rational and conscientious in refusing.

Three grand declarations are required to be made by all those who will conform: The first concerning the *Book of Common-Prayer*; the second concerning *taking up arms against the King*; the third concerning the *Solemn League and Covenant*. Now with reference to all these (especially the first and last) I have had hitherto insuperable objections against the making any such Declaration.

The first Declaration concerning the *Book of Common-Prayer* is to be made in these very words, viz. *I A. B. do declare my unfeigned assent and consent to all and every thing contained and prescribed in and by the Book, intituled, The Book of Common-Prayer, and administration of the Sacraments, and other rites and ceremonies of the Church, according to the use of the Church of England; together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, pointed as they are to be sung or said in Churches, and the form and manner of making, ordaining, and consecrating of Bishops, Priests and Deacons.*

Madam, Here is required *assent and consent*, yea *unfeigned assent and consent*; and not only to all in general, but to every thing in particular contained in and prescribed by the *Book of Common-Prayer*, even whatsoever is there printed, and set down from the very beginning of it to the very end of the same. Surely words could not be devised by all the wit of man more comprehensive, and more significant, to testifie our highest justification and commendation of every point and syllable, of every rite and ceremony, of every matter and thing contained in the whole Book, and in every page and line of it. A man might well think that this *Book of Common-Prayer* dropped immediately out of Heaven, and that it is nothing else but a continued Oracle from first to last. I think here is as much fully to be declared concerning the *Book of Common-Prayer*, as possibly can be concerning the *Book of God*, the Bible it self. Yea I question whether many a sober man would not scruple to declare so much concerning any copy of the Bible now extant in the world in any language whatsoever, even the Originals themselves not excepted, which by transcribing may have their faults, and therefore every thing contained in them not to be unfeignedly assented and consented unto.

Madam, We Protestants protest vehemently against the Popes Infallibility, and with the same reason against the Infallibility of Councils, whether General, National, or Provincial; now they who devised and compiled this *Book of Common-Prayer* themselves were Protestants, and at the most and best but a National Council; and therefore (if true to their own faith) must needs acknowledge themselves far from being infallible in every point and thing devised and compiled by them; and yet for these mortal erring men, like unto our selves, to injoyne and require of all others such an unfeigned assent and consent to all and every thing contained and prescribed by and in their devised form and system of Worship, do notwithstanding (in so doing) in a diametrical opposition assume unto themselves an infallible spirit, else stand guilty of an high presumption in requiring such a Declaration.

Madam, In the Preface to this *Book of Common-Prayer* they profess their own firm persuasion that there is (nor was before their last revising of it) nothing in the whole Book contrary to the Word of God or to sound Doctrine, or which a godly man may not use or submit unto with a good Conscience. Now though this be their persuasion, yet it is not every mans persuasion, and therefore unreasonable to force others to the same profession. Hast thou faith? have it to thy self, force it not upon others; compell them not to think as thou thinkest, believe as thou believest, to declare as thou declarest; study thine own and neighbours peace better; and the rather, because thou art a fallible creature, and may be in an error as well as any other. And according to the tenour and candor of this blessed rule such was the practice and proceedings of our preceding Governours with reference to this *Book of Common-Prayer* from and since our happy Reformation. For they never went about thus strictly to injoyne the Ministers to declare *their unfeigned assent and consent to all and every thing contained and prescribed in and by the Book*, but only appointed it to be read and used, and the rites and ceremonies of it duly to be observed, and no more. This was their moderation and piety, at least their prudence and policy in respect of scandal and further inconvenience: and not without cause; for had the Ministers in those days been rigorously required to declare *their unfeigned assent and consent to all and every thing contained in the said Book*, as we do in our days; I am prone to believe that Hundreds of those who conformed and submitted to the use of things then established in the Church, would have thereupon turned as great Non-conformists as any among us, and so continued till their last breath. For what a conscientious person may think meet to use and submit unto is one thing, but what he declares, he owns and approves, is another of a different nature. Though for peace sake I could swallow down some gnats, and make no bones

bones of them; yet if at the same time I shall moreover be compelled to say and avouch, That these gnats are no gnats; or though I know them to be gnats, yet that I like them, and love to swallow them down; now these gnats are changed into Camels, and my throat is not wide enough to give them any passage. Upon which very account I doubt not to declare, That present Conformity is foreign and quite of another nature from conformity heretofore; Conscience being now much more forced and violated by them in the Chair. I would to God therefore they had required no more in conformity, than *use and submission*, as they there speak; for *Jehu* his criving on furiously is dangerous, and I heartily pray the Chariot may not be overturned in the end; but in the interim I cannot keep pace with them, nor declare my unfeigned assent and consent to their great zeal, nor yet to the great product and *manifesto* of it in any such imposition.

*Madam*, As to a Book of Common-Prayer in general, or an established Liturgy in the Church, I shall object nothing; for according to my poor understanding I never yet heard a sound reason given, why a man may not pray in a form of words prescribed as well as from his own present or premeditated conception; especially where the things prayed for are not fluctuating and falling under changeable circumstances (as the private concerns of particular persons) but settled in their own nature, and always the same from time to time (as the publick concerns of a Nation) as the life of the King, the prosperity of the Kingdom, rain in drought, fair weather in harvest; wherefore I see no exception why Prayers about these (if so commanded) should not be made in the very same words; so likewise the Word and Sacraments, Baptism and the Lords-Supper are always the same without any variety of intention; and therefore I judge we may always beg a blessing upon them by a prescribed form without any variety of expression. And as I say nothing against a Liturgy or prescribed form of publick Prayers in the general, so neither against the main Doctrine contained in the the Prayers of this Book of Common-Prayers in particular. But withal I look upon it as quite another thing to be bound up to declare my *unfeigned assent and consent to all and every thing contained in the Book*, together with those Prayers.

My reason is this: because I cannot but take *assent and consent*, according to the general sense and meaning of those words among all writers and speakers in all Languages, *viz.* That *assent* with reference to the party assenting, relates to his understanding and with reference to the thing assented to, that it relates to the truth and rightfulness of it. So again, that *consent* with reference to the party consenting, relates to his will; and with reference to the thing consented to, that it relates to the goodness, expediency and behooffulness of it. Wherefore (according to the natural and genuine interpretation of these words *assent and consent*) when I declare my *unfeigned assent to all and every thing contain'd and prescribed in and by the Book*, it is all one as if I had declared, *That I own and acknowledg, profess and witness, that all and every thing contained in and prescribed by the Book of Common Prayer is true and right, and not the least error in it from top to bottom, not in any rite or ceremony, not in the form and manner of making, ordaining, and consecrating Bishops, Priests or Deacons, not so much as in pointing the Psalms, or in any other tittle or circumstance*: So again, when I declare my *unfeigned consent to all and every thing contained in it*, it is all one as if I had declared, *That I heartily and cordially close in and chuse every thing mentioned and prescribed in the said Book as good and expedient, as most eligible and behoofful to be done, practised, and observed*. Now that this is the true meaning of the word *consent*, the Law-givers themselves (who best understood their own mind and intention) make it most evident; for in the very body of the same Act speaking of Lectures, *viz.* what these are to do and declare, instead of the word *consent* they put in the word *approve*, as a word *equipollent*, and of the same signification; For the Lecturer is bound openly and publickly to declare his *assent to and approbation of the said Book, and to the use of all the Prayers, Rites, Ceremonies, forms and orders therein contained and prescribed*. Now taking these words *assent and consent* in this sense and meaning (and otherwise I cannot take them to make any sound sense of them) I dare as soon eat hot fire-coals as declare my *unfeigned assent and consent to all and every thing contained and prescribed in and by the Book of Common-Prayer*; because several things are therein contained and prescribed, which I deem scarce right and true, much less good and expedient to be done and embraced. And here to omit many things which I scruple, I shall pitch only upon two or three, which I cannot approve.

1. I neither do nor can approve of the Order appointed for the reading of the holy Scripture; my reason is this, Because many Books of the *Apocrypha* are commanded to be read for the Lessons of the day, as the fabulous Legends of *Tobit* and his Dog, *Bell and the Dragon*, *Judith* & *Baruch*, with the rest; and these are not only to be read wholly & intirely morning and evening two months together, but all of them also under the title and notion of holy Scripture; for so in the whole lump together they are stiled in the order, and no note of discrimination to make any distinction between one and other. But now in the interim, in the said order (as appears by the Kalender) some Books of the Sacred Canon are wholly left out and never to be read; some of them within a very little; some of them but half to be read, and many of them mutilated and curtail'd as to several Chapters contained in them. Here I cannot declare my unfeigned assent and consent.

2. I neither do nor can approve of the order appointed for the Ministration of Baptism. 1. Because of God-fathers and God-mothers. 2. Because of the Cross. 3. Because of what is annexed at the end of the Sacrament. I do not approve of the strict requiring of God-fathers and God-mothers to stand as Sureties and undertakers for the Child to be baptized, *viz.* *That he shall renounce the Devil and all his works, and constantly believe Gods holy word, and obediently keep his commandments*. 1. Because it is unscriptural. 2. Because in the interim the father of the child is left out,



if not wholly thrust out, I am sure he is not mentioned nor taken notice of at all in that publick stipulation, as if he had no concern in it; though it must needs be his proper and peculiar Province and place to undertake such a charge for his own child and flesh, according to the Law of God and nature. Scripture requires not God-fathers but fathers to bring up their children in the *nurture and admonition of the Lord*. 3. Because God-fathers and God mothers are generally brought to the Font to avouch a great untruth, and make themselves obnoxious of lying and perjury in the face of God and the Church. For experience sheweth, that though they solemnly engage in such a promise, yet they never (or very rarely) perform it; perhaps some of them never see the child more after the Christning-day, nor ever enquire more about it. Yea though they so solemnly engage on the behalf of the Infant, yet they hold themselves never the more engaged, but look upon all as a meer Christning Ceremony and complement. For suppose a Parent afterward should challenge his Gossips and say, you promised when you stood Sureties for my child at the Font, to call upon him to hear Sermons, and to see him well instructed in the rudiments and principles of Religion, &c. but you have not done it; and through your neglect he does not hear Sermons, he is not Catechised, he does not renounce the works of the Devil, but is in the high way to ruin, notwithstanding your engagements: What now would be the answer of these persons to the Parents of the Child? Should we look after him or you? whose child is he, yours or ours? He is your own proper charge notwithstanding our standing at the Font; he is a Talent committed to your trust, and therefore if he do otherwise than well, for lack of your care, the blame will be yours; and his blood will be upon your head, as the only criminal. Indeed none in my observation blame the God-fathers and God-mothers if Children be not well disciplin'd and educated, neither do they blame themselves, nor shew any conscience in this matter; though yet it is evident against them, that if Covenants be not performed by them to the utmost of their power, they have broken their faith. Therefore upon the whole matter I judge it far better that such persons should not be called to be Sureties, nor such promises required at their hands.

2. Again, I cannot approve of the Cross in Baptism, especially the Sacramental and mystical way and manner of signing with this sign, as thus, *We receive this Child into the congregation of Christs flock, and do sign him with the sign of the Cross in token hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully fight under Christs banner, against Sin, the World, and the Devil, &c.* This word, *in token*, I confess to me is a meer riddle, and I know not what to make of it, and therefore cannot assent and consent to such an expression; and the rather because I am apt to believe the generality may much mistake it, as if when it is said, *in token*, it had been said, *in virtue and power of this sign* the person baptized should not be ashamed to confess the Faith of Christ crucified, but should fight manfully under Christs banner against Sin, the World, and the Devil; surely even such an occasion of a misunderstanding to the vulgar and injudicious, should be taken away.

The baptizing it self of any person in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, *ipso facto*, does oblige the person baptized to confess the Faith of Christ crucified, and withal exhibits a virtue and power also to every worthy partaker of it to fight against Sin, the World, and the Devil; and therefore after such a person is baptized, such an obligation is upon him, and such a virtue and power supposed to be imparted and communicated unto him; and consequently (if at all) next immediately after washing or sprinkling in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, that form of words; *In token hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the Faith of Christ crucified, &c.* would more properly and congruously be used and applied. But now to remove them from their due place, and reserve them to the sign of the Cross, as if baptizing with water were not sufficient of it self, but more over the sign of the Cross needful to bind the Conscience, and confer the blessing, this I confess seems to me not only preposterous but very dangerous. Crossing in this manner is too too like a Sacrament upon a Sacrament, the devised Sacrament of man to the instituted Sacrament of God.

Though Christians in the Primitive times might make use of the sign of the Cross, yet the very same reason which might put them upon that use with a reference to the Heathens, should now move us wholly to disuse it with a reference to *Papists*; Professors then signed themselves with the sign of the Cross to distinguish themselves from the Pagans, who scorned the Cross, together with every sign and token of it; and with parity of reason we should now forbear to doing to distinguish our selves from the Idolatrous *Papists*; who superstitiously adore the Cross, foolishly, fondly, and wickedly signing themselves with it upon every occasion, thinking themselves no good Catholics without so doing, putting no little hope and confidence in it to free and protect them from all evil, and to furnish them and invest them with all good. Now to witness our dislike and derestation of their vanity herein, I cannot unfeignedly assent and consent to the sign of the Cross.

3. I cannot approve what is annexed in the end of the Sacrament, *viz. It is certain by Gods word, that children which are baptized dying before they commit actual sin are undoubtedly saved.* I would they had quoted the place, for I confess mine own ignorance that I know no such word in Scripture; no such word as will give me a certainty of perswasion beyond all possibility of doubting of the Salvation of Infants, though baptized, and though dying before they have committed actual sin.

Are not the Children of wicked Parents (filthy Whoremongers and Whores living openly in all notorious sin, and wholly without God in the world) constantly baptized? and many of them dying immediately after Baptism? Now are we sure by the Word of God, and without doubt that all these go to Heaven? Methinks that in the second Commandment gives some scruple to my faith, *I will punish the iniquity of the fathers upon their children to the third and fourth generation.*

Suppose a Christian King should conquer a Country of Pagans, and *Mahometans*, or *Jews*, and compel

compel all their Infants forthwith to be baptized, and some of them immediately expire, at least before they have committed actual sin; is the Salvation of all such sure and past all doubt, and this to be made out, and cleared by the Word of God?

Is it in the power of man to make Infants sure and certain of Salvation? It is in the power of man to kill a poor Infant, and to chuse his time for doing of it; I am sure many Whores murder their Babes before Baptism, and they may as well do it after, immediately after, and so assuredly send their Infants thither, whither they shall never come themselves except they repent. And so might the forelaid King and Conqueror (after by Baptism he had given them their sure and unquestionable passport for Paradise) he might even in charity and kindness immediately cut them off, and without any further hazzard give them possession of eternal bliss. I had thought no mortal wight had had such power over souls.

May a Minister, since Baptizing gives such an unquestionable title unto Heaven, deny or suspend the Ordinance to any Infant whatsoever, if he might be permitted to administer it? Suppose *Turks* or *Jews* should quietly permit him to baptize their Children, yea and desire him to do it for them, though meerly upon some by-pretence and foreign to Christianity; shall he deny them? But suppose a true Believer and a good Christian should bring his own Child to the Font, and beg there of the Minister to have it baptized, but yet either out of weakness or tenderness of conscience scruples God-fathers and God-mothers, and the sign of the Cross, and dares not admit of them; shall therefore the Minister deny his Babe Christendom, which according to his own perswasion would give the Babe a certain assurance of Salvation? and keep it in the interim under a suspicion of damnation, and this also according to his own perswasion? for as he denies it Christendom, so also he would deny it Christian burial, if it die unbaptized; (though by the way I see no great reason for it, nor can I approve of it) but so it is appointed, viz. That the Office of the Dead shall not be used for any who die unbaptized: And why not used? Because they have no sure and certain hope of a Resurrection unto life concerning such a person, and therefore the unbaptized in that Order are ranked with self-murderers and excommunicate. But now shall a Minister dare to withhold so much good from, and endeavour so much evil to the souls of poor Infants in denying them their Christendom, and all meerly upon the account of some accessories and scrupled accidents invented and imposed by man, and nothing at all of the essence of Baptism it self? Besides the impiety and irreligion of such a Process, the Minister (according to his own faith) would be most cruel and unmerciful in so doing, and deserved if possible to be unchristened himself again, and turn'd among *Canibals* as one more deeply dipt and baptized in their barbarous inhumanity than any of themselves; and yet if he be a true Son of the Church, and punctually observe his prescribed rule, he must not baptize any Infant without God-fathers and God-mothers without signing of it with the sign of the Cross, whether it be saved or damned. But these things are hard to assent and consent unto, and I cannot do it.

3. I cannot approve of the order for the burial of the Dead, particularly that passage of it, Forasmuch as it hath pleased God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear Brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground, &c. My reason is this, Because though we be bound to judg according to the utmost bounds of charity concerning all, yea even of those with whom we would not change souls, nor be in their condition after death for ten thousand worlds, yet positively and peremptorily without all limitation or discrimination to say and avouch concerning every one whom we bury, That God in great mercy has taken his soul, viz. by death out of the body, and taken it to himself; this I profess is utterly beyond my faith, and of the Gospel also; which (if I understand aright) speaks altogether in another language to impenitent sinners. It is past contradiction that thousands are cut off by God in the midst of their sins, drunkenness, whoring, swearing, without all signs of repentance from first to last, so living and so dying; now how can it be said, That God took away such persons out of this world by death in mercy, in great mercy? Inasmuch as at the same instant they were taken away from all possibility of future repentance and amendment of life; we may rather fear, That God took them away in wrath, in great wrath, provoked hereunto by the long abuse of his patience, and their own impenitency. Yet nevertheless the Priest must not only say, That God took away all such persons in mercy, in great mercy, but moreover positively affirm, That God took them to himself; that is, into Heaven, if we believe the Lords Prayer, Our Father which art in Heaven, there God is said to be in a most eminent manner. Scripture saith expressly, That neither Adulterers, nor Fornicators, nor Drunkards, shall ever go to Heaven; yet in a perfect opposition, when I bury a known Adulterer, Fornicator, Drunkard, I must declare and avouch that his soul is assuredly gone thither. I dare not thus damn a person while he is living, and yet save him when he is dead. Nor yet again can I commit his body to the ground in a sure and certain hope of a Resurrection unto eternal life; which words must necessarily be spoken with reference to the person then interred, inasmuch as they are the continuation of the foregoing declaration, viz. God's taking his soul to himself. Besides it follows (which puts it out of doubt) in the last Collect or Prayer, That when we shall depart this life, we may rest in him (viz. Christ) as our hope is this our Brother doth. Alas, I am so far from having any sure and certain hope of his Resurrection unto eternal life and salvation, that I rather have a sure and certain fear of his Resurrection unto eternal death and damnation.

Madam, These are some of my Objections against the first Declaration, which stop up my way from conforming.

Your most humble Servant,

A. B.